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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: SECOND DAY OF PROTESTS PEACEFUL

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Two thousand protestors gathered for a second day in front of Parliament January 15, a day after a demonstration of roughly the same size turned violent as extremist groups clashed with police. The January 14 clashes were the worst since mass protests brought down the Socialist government in 1997. This generation of protestors lacks organization and a common political goal. They are quick to distance themselves from attempts by the political opposition to use their protest to provoke early elections. At this stage there is no threat to government stability, but a long continuation of the total gas cut-off, now in its 10th day, could prompt powerful labor unions to join the protests, challenging government stability. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) On January 14 a diverse group of 2000 -- students urging better campus conditions, farmers calling for state subsidies, and environmentalists protesting expanding construction in protected areas, launched a protest in front of parliament. Their action was hijacked by members of extremist organizations and so-called "soccer hooligans" who threw bottles at police and overturned security barriers. Police broke up the protest after receiving a tip that a protester was carrying an explosive device. The highly unusual event left 154 arrested and 33 injured.

13. (SBU) On January 15 about 2000 students and other mostly-peaceful protesters continued their demonstration, waving the Bulgarian flag and chanting "Mafia" and "resign." Having learned from the previous day's violent clashes, the police stepped up security, with the number of policemen on the scene roughly equal to the number of protestors. The protest took on political overtones in its second day. The weak center-right parliamentary opposition joined in and vowed to boycott plenary sessions while protests continue. There were predictable accusations and denials that opposition parties were using the protest to force early elections.

14. (SBU) Comment: The January 14 protests were the worst since 1997, when tens of thousands of angry protestors staged mass gatherings and strikes and ultimately brought down the then-Socialist government. The current protests do not pose an immediate threat to government stability, partly due to the absence of the two major trade unions which played decisive roles in the 1997 events. So far the labor organizations capable of causing serious economic disruption (metallurgical workers, drivers, and miners) have stayed out of the protest. Current protest organizers lack a clear political message and refuse to be identified with any particular political movement. People are upset over the ten-day gas cut-off. They lack confidence in the government, which is edgy.

Absent some dramatic new development, government stability is not in question, but it senses that events are not in its hands.

MCELDOWNEY